

Fort Davis

National Historic Site

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Curriculum Materials Grades 9-12

Student Activity: The “Indian Problem” in 1881

LESSON: The “Indian Problem” in 1881 – Westward Expansion and the U.S. Government

Summary: Students will read attached excerpts from U.S. President Chester Arthur’s First Annual Message to Congress in 1881 and answer the questions on the handout below.

Guiding Question: How did government-supported “Manifest Destiny” affect different cultural groups living in the West?

Objectives: Students will—

- Understand the role the U.S. government played in facilitating Westward Expansion
- Interpret the effect that Westward Expansion had on native peoples and their traditional ways of life

(To relate this to the story of Fort Davis, students must understand that Fort Davis soldiers encountered Apaches, Comanches, & Kiowa while attempting to make the area of west Texas safe for white settlement. By the early 1880s, a few Apaches were still active, but resistance began failing when Apache leader Victorio was killed in 1880. Remaining Apaches were killed or were moved to reservations in New Mexico Territory to begin the process of assimilation.)

Materials Needed:

- Copies of Chester Arthur’s First Message to Congress (3 pages) Photo credits: Library of Congress and Edward S. Curtis/Northwestern University Library
- Copies of class worksheet (1 page)
- Writings of oral reports from displaced western American Indian tribes (student research)

Procedure:

1. Using primary documents, students understand how the government supported Westward Expansion
2. Students read 1881 document, answer related questions; perhaps take turns reading aloud
3. Students examine various source materials to gain perspective from native peoples viewpoint

Assessment:

- Answers to questions may be graded for accuracy of information.
- To creatively assess students, teacher may have students develop a skit between pioneers and native peoples...and then evaluate based on a rubric outlining how much research students did to provide historically accurate information in the skit.

National Social Studies Standards:

III. Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of people, places, and environments.

V. Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of interactions among individuals, groups, and institutions.

VI. Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of how people create and change structures of power, authority, and governance.

VII. Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of how people organize for the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services.

KEY to Reading Guide: *Chester Arthur's First Annual Message to Congress*

1. Vocabulary words to define: absorb, holden, imperative, persuaded, agricultural

Absorb - To occupy the full attention, interest, or time of; engross

Holden - To bear, sustain, or support, as with the hands or arms, or by any other means

Imperative - absolutely necessary or required; unavoidable

Persuaded - urge, influence, move, entice, impel

Agricultural - related to farming

2. What “rights” did Chester Arthur, President from September of 1881 to March of 1885, think Indians [sometimes known as Native Americans, First Americans, or American Indians] should be given? Indians should receive protection of the law, a small amount of land, and schools. In his words: *“The Indian should receive the protection of the law.”*

3. What was the “Indian problem” or the “great permanent problem” that the President references, and what was his overall goal for solving the problem?

President Arthur’s overall goal was to assimilate the Indians into white culture by encouraging them to partake in activities and industries that the white settlers participated in, including school and farming. In his words: *“The well-attested reports of their increasing interest in husbandry justify the hope and belief that the enactment of such a statute as I recommend would be at once attended with gratifying results.”*

4. What do you think was missing from President Arthur’s address? President Arthur did not consider the Indians people’s culture, traditions, or ideals that they might wish to maintain. He said: *“In return for such considerate action on the part of the government, there is reason to believe that the Indians in large numbers would be persuaded to sever their tribal relations and to engage at once in agricultural pursuits.”*

5. Chester Arthur said: “Many of them [Indians] realize the fact that their hunting days are over and that it is now for their best interests to conform their manner of life to the new order of things.” What do you think this quote meant? He was saying that the lifestyle the Indians are used to no longer exist and that they would be happier if they just did things like the white settlers.

6. Can you think of any presidential or government policies in recent times that are in any way similar to this document? Answers will vary.

7. Were the President's recommendations acted on by the U.S. Congress? Yes. Schools, "Indian schools," were opened and "Indian" children were shipped to states in the eastern U.S. in order to be educated as their white counterparts. Land was given to "Indians" to encourage agriculture. These assimilation experiments failed miserably, however.

8. Explain the last graphic--a painting by John Gast, circa 1872, entitled *American Progress*, and the meaning of the term "Manifest Destiny." When was the term "Manifest Destiny" first used? Relate this painting to what is happening in America in the latter part of the 19th century.

Quoted from New World Encyclopedia:

- ✓ "The painting is an allegorical representation of Manifest Destiny. In the scene, an angelic woman (sometimes identified as Columbia, a 19th-century personification of the United States) carries the light of 'civilization' westward with American settlers, stringing telegraph wire as she travels. American Indians, buffalos, and wild animals are driven into the darkness before them."
- ✓ "Manifest Destiny is a 19th-century belief that the U.S. had a mission to expand westward across the North American continent, spreading its form of democracy, freedom, and culture. The expansion was deemed to be not only good, but also obvious ('manifest') and certain ('destiny'). Many believed the mission to be divinely inspired, while others felt it more as an altruistic right to expand the territory of liberty. Originally a political catch phrase of the nineteenth century, Manifest Destiny eventually became a standard historical term, often used as a synonym for the territorial expansion of the United States across North America." The term Manifest Destiny was not used until after 1845, when journalist John O'Sullivan coined it.

